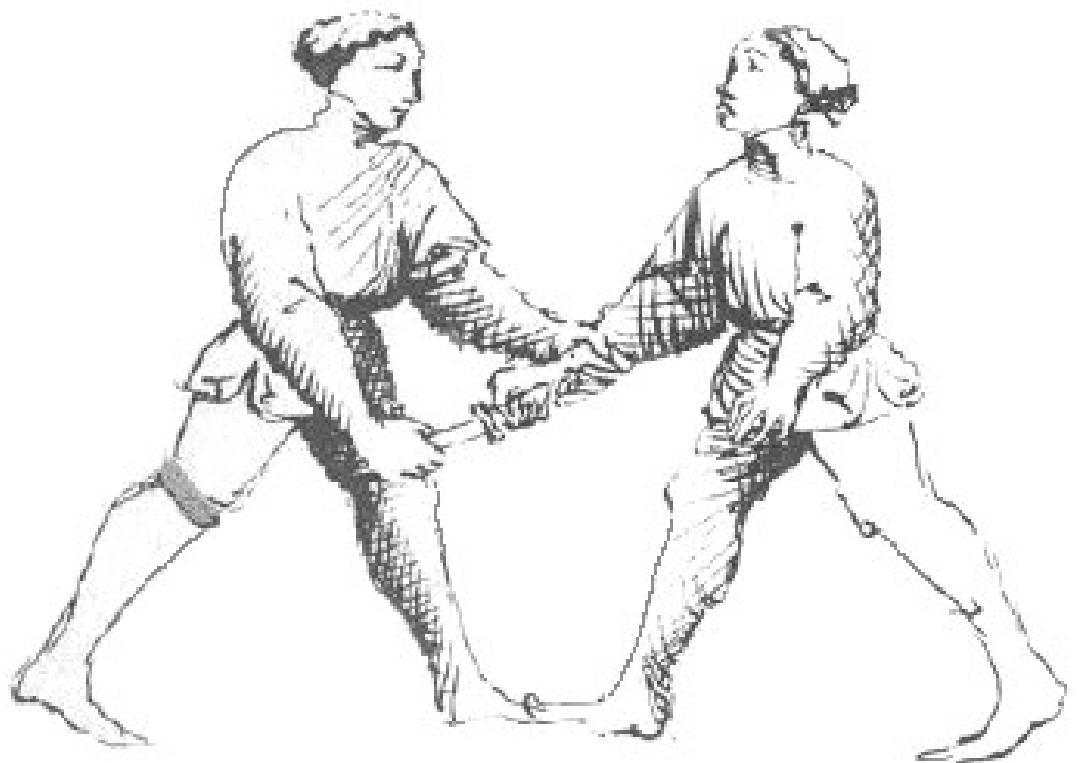




Ottawa Medieval Sword Guild

Daga

*Basic techniques for defending against
the dagger, in the Medieval style of
Fiore dei Liberi*



*February, 2006
Not for Resale*

*Christopher Penney and
Nicholas Conway*

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This article is a product of the authors themselves, and any criticisms of the document should be addressed to them alone. Except where noted, the following interpretations are those of the authors- any similarity to those of other writers, persons or groups is purely coincidental. Any such occurrence, we feel, only serves to validate our work, and the work of others who share our conclusions. That said, this work could not have been completed without the assistance and support of a number of individuals, both within the Ottawa Medieval Sword Guild and the greater Western Martial Arts community. We would first like to thank the people from the Academy of European Medieval Martial Arts, in particular Provost David Cvet, Free Scholler Brian McIlmoyle and Free Scholler David Murphy for their communications concerning some of their interpretations of dei Liberi's dagger system. We also thank everyone at OMSG, who have assisted with trying out our ideas, and providing input throughout the development of our grappling program. Thanks to Scholler Leslie Lemar for reading over the manuscript and providing valuable comments throughout. Unless otherwise stated, all of the images and text from the *Pisani-Dossi* manuscript were kindly provided by the Knights of the Wild Rose. The text was translated by Hermes Michelini, and the images of the plates were cleaned up by Mich Shire.

Disclaimer

This article depicts and describes fighting techniques designed to cause severe pain and injury. They are presented for educational and entertainment purposes only. We study this martial system for reasons of cultural heritage and recreation, and are not responsible for the use and mis-use of the information contained herein. Those wishing to study and train in this fighting system should do so *only under the supervision and instruction of a reputable, qualified instructor*.

...you have been warned!

Introduction

Fiore dei Liberi was an Italian weapons master from the second half of the fourteenth century¹, noted for recording his comprehensive martial system in a manuscript entitled *Flos Duellatorum*, or the Flower of Battles. Since beginning to study the art of dei Liberi in the fall of 2001, we have been trying to understand his system of martial arts. Our first reference work was the Academy of European Medieval Martial Arts' (AEMMA) *The Art of Longsword Combat, Book 1* (Cvet 2001). We felt this work to be a good starting point, but if we were to understand how each component of dei Liberi's martial system contributes to the whole, we needed to look more closely at each aspect of the art, using translations of the original manuscripts.

The *Pisani-Dossi* manuscript is generally accepted to be the 'lighter' version of *Flos Duellatorum*. The manuscript held by the Getty Library in the United States is larger, with expanded captions for each plate. Until recently, little information from the Getty manuscript was available on the internet, though more of the Getty manuscript has recently been translated online <www.the-exiles.org>. When we began our interpretation of this material, the *Pisani-Dossi* manuscript was the only one available, and is therefore the one that this article is primarily based on. With the increasing release of material from the Getty manuscript we have been able to verify our previous work, and provide additional comments from the Getty version where useful.

This article is ordered in a manner that introduces the student to the various historical, practical and theoretical elements of Fiore dei Liberi's system of dagger fighting. Beginning with the historical background and different types of dagger, we then proceed to basic dagger fighting concepts, and finally the plays of the manuscript. Throughout, we have provided exercises to develop habits and skills to compliment the techniques as described in the manuscript. We hope that this article will provide a good introduction to medieval dagger fighting for those with little previous experience with medieval martial arts. For more experienced practitioners, we hope that this article will allow others to see how we in the Ottawa Medieval Sword Guild approach the dagger fighting system of Fiore dei Liberi.

¹ We do not discuss the biographical details of Fiore dei Liberi in this article, but historical information on Master dei Liberi (along with a variety of other medieval and later-period masters) can be found in AEMMA's *The Art of Longsword Combat, Book 1* (Cvet 2001).

History and Background

The medieval dagger in all its forms, evolved from the earlier knives in use in Europe such as the Scramsax of Northern Europe and the Pugio of Rome. Aspects of some designs were also probably influenced by Eastern designs from Persia and North Africa. Today there are an untold number of specimens that represent different styles, types and designs in museums and private collections. Many defy classification and are unique individual examples of knives and daggers. The dimensions, decorations and actual use as tool, weapon or ornament were all dependant on the desires of the owner. All men carried a dagger or knife of some sort on his person, no matter what their social status.

No matter what style or design, all daggers and knives from almost every period in history have the same basic features and are constructed in basically the same way, including both a blade area and a hilt area. The hilt is composed of a tang (the unseen part of the blade which attaches to the grip), the grip (made from leather, wood, bone, ivory, wire, metal “scales” or any combination of these), quillons or guard and the pommel, which is the end of the grip. Blade length varies, but is usually in the area of 7” to 15” long, and was generally slender or narrow. The blade can have a point (obviously), edges, fuller (groove running along the flat of the blade), and a ricasso, which is the rectangular and generally unsharpened portion of the blade that passes through the quillons.

Here is a special note on the Tang. This is the part of the weapon where most of the stresses from combat will occur. More so than even the point, critical failures (the weapon breaking apart) will occur here. Although historical daggers were made in varying degrees of quality, this mostly applies to those purchasing daggers as real-life cutting or training tools. On well-made daggers, knives and swords, the tang will extend from the ricasso all the way through the grip and attach to the pommel as an **integral** piece of the blade. Less well made weapons will have the tang, still extending from the ricasso all the way through the grip and attaching to the pommel, but it is a separate piece welded on to the blade. This is still very strong but a failure at the weld is a real possibility. Poorly made weapons, suitable as wall hangers or letter openers, will have a stub of metal extending from the ricasso in around an inch, just enough for a handle to be glued on to it. These are likely to fail if they are dropped on a firm surface, to say nothing of striking an aggressive, enthusiastic and armoured opponent. This information is of particular importance to anyone who plans on engaging in full contact play. An armoured full contact match is no place to discover the flaws of your training or sparing weapon.

Despite the multitude of dagger styles that can be found, we will discuss five designs that appear or have been found to be widely used throughout all of Europe. What follows is a brief description of the daggers common to our period of interest, which ranges from around A.D.1300 to A.D.1500. This is by no means a complete list.

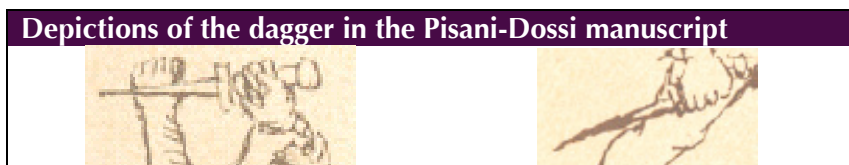
1. The ordinary belt knife or **Knife Dagger** was the most common. This type of dagger was mostly found in the civilian population. It is descended from the Anglo-Saxon Scramsax knife, but fashioned in a lighter, neater and more streamlined manner. It was usually single edged with a long triangle blade resembling the common domestic kitchen knife. Hilts were usually made of wood, and some had small pommels. Of course a variety of styles existed, some elaborately decorated.

2. Early **Quillon Daggers**² are generally considered military weapons. They had long, slender double-edged blades of varying length and were considered an effective means for close quarters combat with an armoured foe. The main distinguishing features of quillon daggers were the design of the pommel and the cross guard, which quite often resembles a very small sword. Sometimes this happened because they were copied from swords and often they were constructed as part of a matched pair for a sword and dagger set. There were as many varieties and styles of cross guard and pommels as there were with swords, and as with all daggers, they varied depending on the tastes of the owner or craftsman.
3. The **Baselard**, believed to have originated in or around Switzerland, was another extremely popular civilian weapon. One source suggests it was considered a mandatory “accessory” to everyday dress (Thompson, 1999). It also became by the mid-fourteenth century a popular second line or back-up weapon in military circles. It came in any number of sizes, mostly double edged. Its main distinguishing feature was the hilt design, the handles being wood and riveted to the tang and the cross guard that was only a simple quillon but was matched by a similar piece for the pommel. The hilt therefore resembled a capital “I” or an “H” placed on its side.
4. The **Ballock Knife** or kidney dagger was another primarily civilian weapon that was often carried by military personnel. It was comprised of a single edged blade of varying lengths with distinctive testicular-like lobes for a guard, which gave it its rather crude name. These were sometime carved separately, and riveted to a distinctly “phallus-shaped” hilt. Its “kidney” name was a Victorian invention, where such base language could not be used in polite society.
5. The **Rondel Dagger** seems to have been introduced in or around the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. It was usually seen carried by an armed (i.e. armoured) warrior. The rondel was almost certainly designed primarily as an armour-piercing weapon, and this is the main reason we use it for our training. It is ideally suited to defeating chainmaile armour, and if suitable force is applied, it could defeat some types of plate armour as well. The overall design of blade and hilt did not lend it to the more utilitarian and mundane tasks of everyday life, such as carving meat and buttering bread. The rondel was most definitely a weapon first. The rondel dagger has a large strong blade that tapers to a fine point. Generally they are found with blades 10 to 13 inches long, although some may be shorter or longer. It may be sharpened on a single edge, which seems to be most likely, but some were fully sharpened on both edges, with the second edge only sharpened partially from the tip, usually just the first third, or it may be completely unsharpened. In this form it is essentially a pointed shaft of steel with a handle. The quillon and the pommel are comprised of round metal “rondels” or disks of metal. These are the unique features of this dagger and are what gives the rondel its name. The design and features, like most other medieval daggers, varied according to their owner’s tastes. Primarily used with a thrust or a stab, the rondel functioned by having its fine point going to the inside of a single link of maile, and as it penetrated further, acting as a wedge to spread the link apart until it breaks. The surrounding links are then weakened, and with further penetration

² A later form of quillon dagger was developed in the later Medieval and early Renaissance periods.

more links break or spread away. Complete penetration into the body follows. If the rondel has sharpened edges, penetration is made easier as the edge adds cutting forces to the wedge-like action. The rondels themselves aid in the penetrating power of the dagger by providing very strong platforms to support the hand. They allow for the powerful stabs and thrust without the fear of the weapon hand sliding up over the blade upon stiff resistance, or without the pain and potential injury that comes from a hand slamming into the narrow cruciform quillons of regular daggers. When attempting more powerful thrusts, the non-weapon hand can add force by using the pommel rondel during a thrust or stab, or even to “hammer the blade home” with repeated strikes on the pommel.

It should be noted at this point that the daggers depicted in dei Liberi’s manuals do not all appear to be rondel daggers. Although the front guard resembles a rondel in some images, the pommel is definitely not a disk. A kind of half-rondel dagger with a small rear pommel can be found on several grave effigies from the late fourteenth century (Matt Easton, pers. comm.). They could just as easily be any of the five common weapon designs in use during the middle to high middle ages, possibly a quillon dagger with a round pommel.



From Novati, 1902

It is academic, in any event, because the techniques illustrated could be done equally well with any of these designs. What is clear, however, is that dei Liberi’s style of dagger combat is point oriented. The plates show dagger attacks as being either stabs or thrusts, which are effective using any design. He does not show any cutting or slashing attacks with the dagger, although such attacks from the sword sections could logically be considered viable in some circumstances.

Basic Theory on Using the Dagger

There are the three basic types of attacks which we will discuss, starting with the least useful and proceeding to the primary and most effective. These basic techniques are found in *Flos Duellatorum* although it should again be again noted that slashing or cutting maneuvers are not found specifically in the dagger section. This is a logical progression taken from elements of the sword, both one and two-handed.

Tertiary attacks are the above-mentioned slashing attacks. While it is obvious that slashing an armoured target with a knife of any sort is fairly useless, an exception to this is when the slashes are directed at exposed straps or arming points on the opponent. Cutting these cause weaknesses as the supported parts of the armour loose effectiveness and openings are provided for subsequent attacks. The individual design of a specific dagger may have precluded these attacks in actual combat if the owner used a rondel dagger without a sharpened edge, which was not uncommon.

Secondary attacks are the hooking techniques which assist in such maneuvers as tripping, throwing or trapping. These are accomplished by hooking the dagger over, under or around areas like the head/neck, legs and knees and the elbows and hands. Dei Liberi demonstrates the use of a dowel as a leveraging tool after the grappling section, and the idea of using a weapon for leverage on an opponent can be seen in the half-sword section, and elsewhere in the manuscript.

The primary attack of dei Liberi's dagger is of course stabbing or thrusting attacks with the point. Such attacks, when fighting an armoured opponent, are directed at the weak points in the armour. Fiore dei Liberi, in the Getty manuscript, notes that high and low strikes tend to attack high and low targets, respectively, and strikes from either side tend to target that side. As there are three basic ways to use the dagger, we divide target areas into three basic types. Note that target areas are not the same as angles of attack. Each specific target type may be attacked from more than one angle.

All of the following targets apply mainly to armoured engagements, but all are just as effective un-armoured. In un-armoured fights the target areas expand to most of the body. While the structure of the manuscript suggests that these techniques are directly focused on the Judicial Duel, we believe that they are also presented as a means of basic self-defense.

The primary target areas are the neck/throat area, the armpit and the groin. These areas are generally only lightly covered with padded or chain armour, if armoured at all. Attacks at any of these three areas would most likely produce a fatal wound and almost certainly produce a fight stopping one, since they contain major arteries or nerve clusters as well as the major air passage. Even if no penetration occurs, a hard and forcefully delivered strike in these areas will cause severe pain and can impede or at least disrupt a fighter's ability or desire to continue fighting. During our play we use extreme caution when targeting these areas, as any accidental contact with flesh could have serious consequences. Students of the dagger are discouraged from targeting them until suitable control is demonstrated through extensive practice.

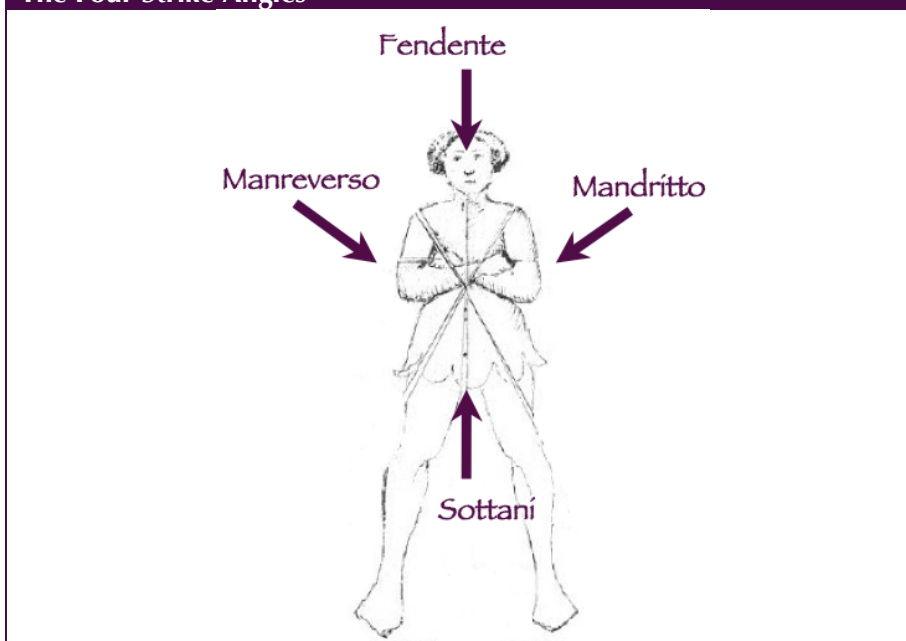
The secondary targets are targets that probably will not produce fatal injuries. Injuries in these areas, however, can seriously impede an opponent's ability and desire to fight. These areas include the inside of the elbow, the top of the thigh or hip between the bottom of the chest protection and the top of the cuisse and the hand, either attacking the palm area which is usually covered only in light leather, or the back of the hand from behind the hourglass wrist portion of a gauntlet.

The tertiary targets include areas that can have some or all of the fatal or fight stopping or impeding wound qualities of the primary and secondary targets but they are extremely difficult and/or dangerous targets to pursue. Consider them targets of opportunity. The general rule is to take them if they present themselves, but do not target them over a primary/secondary target and above all do not go looking for them or attempt to create openings for them. These targets include basically any part lightly armoured or unarmoured such as the sides of the back, the back of the neck, the knee, the hamstring or back of thigh, the inner thigh or the lower back/kidney/liver area. As with the primary targets, care needs to be exercised when striking these areas, for the sake of safety.

Attacking with the Dagger

Although not shown in the *Pisani-Dossi* manuscript, the dagger section in the Getty version illustrates the four striking angles of the dagger- three from above and one from below. Strikes from above are made holding the dagger *sopramano*, or in a reverse or “icepick” grip. They are known as *mandritto* (downward from the right side), *manreverso* (downward from the left side) and *fendente* (straight down along the midline). The lower strike (*Sottani*) is made *sotomano*, or in a forehand (“hammer”) grip. This angle stabs straight up along the midline.

The Four Strike Angles



In the Getty manuscript, dei Liberi makes several points about the different strikes. The right-side attack (*mandritto*) would seem the most common, and it is also the most powerful of the four strikes. It is the most natural attack to make, from a biomechanical point of view. To throw this strike, stand in *posta frontale* with your left leg leading. Your left hand should be in front of your face (though not obstructing your vision), and the dagger, in your right hand, should be by your right ear, the point facing forward. Fiore dei Liberi does not specifically describe this stance, but it fits with dei Liberi’s assertion that one should be able to strike, but also cover incoming attacks using the left hand. From this position you can strike your opponent as you step *mezza volta* (i.e. a passing step), aiming anywhere from his elbows to his temples on the right side (his left). The most important point to remember is not to telegraph your strike by “cocking” the dagger by pulling it back. When striking, the dagger should *always* move directly forward from its starting position.

Assuming your strike does not hit its target, the dagger should travel downward from right to left. Your arm should be extended through the strike, but never locked. Once the strike is complete raise the dagger in front of your face in *posta frontale*, this time with the right leg leading. In this position your dagger is forward, but your left hand is not in a good position to cover an attack (as dei Liberi notes). From here you can strike *manreverso*, striking downward from the left as you steep forward, lifting the dagger as you finish the strike, ending in the original left-leg leading position.

The final strike from the *sopramano* grip is *fendente*, which strikes similar to the *mandritto*, but in this case travelling vertically down the midline.

To make the final strike you need to switch grips on the dagger *sopramano* to *sotomano*. Doing this with a large dagger (particularly with a rondel), in gloved hands is not a subtle action. Gripping the blade of the dagger with your left hand, let go of the dagger with your right and turn your hand to grip it *sotomano*.

Hold the dagger low, by your right hip. Your left hand is available to help you defend, either held down low (*porta di ferro*) or up in front of your face (*dente di zenchiar*). The final strike comes from the centre, striking at the groin or belly of your opponent.

Exercise: These four strikes can be performed as a continuous drill, developing multiple-strike attacks, footwork and grip-shifting. Once you are comfortable with these, experiment with footwork. Most strikes can be performed with either leg leading, and you need not make every strike with a passing step.

One consideration when attacking with a dagger is that starting with a straightforward attack will rarely be successful. When standing in a left leg forward stance, a jab or other quick strike with the left hand can distract your opponent, and draw a reaction from him enabling your attack with the dagger to get through. This sort of attack with the left hand is covered elsewhere in the dagger section, where the Master defends himself against an opponent who has grabbed his collar. Although dei Liberi clearly states that grabbing your opponent's collar is not a good idea, the idea of initiating your attack with your left hand is a part of dagger play, and one that we practice in training.

Practicing Dagger Plays

The plays of the Remedy Masters and their Schollers are designed to teach specific techniques. They should also be used to develop specific attributes, including dexterity, timing, distance, sense of feel and speed, to name a few. In particular, the Master plates teach basic skills, and the Scholler plates elaborate on the Master techniques. For all plays, however, there are several phases or levels of drills that we practice, designed to introduce the student to the required attributes.

Phase One - Static Attack Drills

This is the most basic way to practice these plays, and is best for people with little experience in the martial arts. To begin with, the attacking player does not move. He assumes a static position representing the extension of the attack. Assuming a *mandritto* strike, for example, his left leg should be leading, his right arm should almost be fully extended, and the point of the dagger should be held about an inch from the defending players face. To perform a phase one drill, the attacker should hold this position, yielding to the actions of the defender. The defender then executes the movements of the play. At this point this should be done slowly. The defender should concentrate on performing all aspects of the technique correctly (i.e. warding, grabbing, stepping, etc.) and in the correct time. For example, with a dagger an inch from your face, you will *have* to block the dagger arm and move it aside before you can step towards the attacking player. Otherwise, if you try to step in before you check the dagger hand, you will walk straight into the point. This should be repeated at least 5 to 10 times. Phase one drills are meant to help with the basic movements of the technique, tactile sense, and moving in the correct time.

Phase Two – Slow Attack Drills

The second level is not much more advanced than the first. Although the Attacking player is now starting from his beginning stance, and moving throughout the strike, all movements are purposely slow and deliberate. Phase two drills are meant to introduce a student to the concepts of the proper timing of a defense, and working with a moving partner. The important point to remember here is you should react to the attack, and not move at the same time as your partner. In a controlled drill you *know* exactly what your partner is going to do, but you must teach yourself to wait until your partner has begun his movement. In free play you do not know what your opponent will do until he does it, so you must teach yourself to observe your opponent and respond to what you see, and not what you already know. You should run phase two drills as long as you need in order to gain proper form and technique. Do not increase the speed of the drill until you are well grounded in the correct movement. Once you are comfortable, you can move on to phase three drills, and gradually increase the speed of the training.

Phase Three – Faster Attack Drills

Once you have a firm grasp of the technique that you are drilling, the attacking player can begin using more speed, and a little resistance to the student. This can often be quite

difficult for the attacker to do properly; many people in this situation will too quickly use excessive speed and resistance, which is counter productive to training. The purpose of the "attacker" is not to beat the defending player, but to provide an appropriate challenge for the student to build up quickness, strength and timing while maintaining proper form and timing. Simply put, if the defender cannot properly apply the technique to the attacking player, then the attacker is using too much speed and/or resistance. As the speed increases (from about 1/3 to 3/4 speed) students should wear a fencing mask as a minimum of protective gear, and possibly leather vambraces for protection. Heavy gloves should not be used, however, until the student has learned the technique and can successfully execute it at speed. As the speed increases the attacking player must exercise extreme caution, as even a wooden practice dagger can be very dangerous. Here in OMSG we use paper daggers, constructed from a rolled-up newspaper and duct tape. Even these can cause injury, so the attacking player should always aim for the fencing mask at this point.

Phase Four – Full Speed Drills

This is the final phase of controlled drill training. The attacking player uses full force and speed. Keep in mind that speed decreases as power increases- the best technique for striking with a dagger is to use speed over excessive power. A sharp dagger doesn't need excessive power, and for practical purposes, it poses less risk to a training partner. Although the attacking player should be using full speed, resistance to the student's defensive techniques should only be gradually increased, allowing the student to gain the speed and strength required. At this point, a paper dagger, fencing mask, vambraces and lightly padded gloves are mandatory (do not even think of doing this with a metal dagger). Remember that this is not free-play or sparring; do no more or less than the described drill- you are simply doing it at full speed. This is designed to increase the student's speed and strength, as well as the other preceding attributes. Remember, if you find that you have difficulty maintaining proper form at full speed then you should slow down for a while until you feel ready to speed up again. The amount of time it takes to work up to full speed is different for everybody. It will also speed up as you learn more plays. It should also be noted that performing these drills should also be beneficial to the attacking player, who must keep proper form, timing and footwork while striking. The dagger attacks should be aimed at the defending player's throat or face, and should theoretically hit the defender if he doesn't move to ward the attack.

A note when practicing the plays of the dagger: Looking through the plates, it should become clear that some of these manoeuvres are designed to break limbs, dislocate joints, and in general cause a lot of pain. Although this is a martial art, which implies a certain degree of risk, **do not perform any action to its full application if it is designed to injure the person on whom it is applied.** Most dangerous plays will be described as such in the text- take these warnings seriously. Control your actions at all times, halting dangerous techniques before your partner is hurt. This control is perhaps the most important attribute to learn before moving on to full-speed training.

The Four Master Concepts of the Dagger

At the beginning of the dagger section, Fiore dei Liberi illustrates four key concepts when fighting someone who is armed with the dagger. These concepts are repeated in the Getty Manuscript, where dei Liberi actually names five concepts:

And I shall do these five things always. Namely I take the dagger and strike, I break the arms and I bind them and I force him to ground. And if of these five plays one or the other I will not abandon.
(dei Liberi, c.1409, trans. Lovett et al. 2002-2005)

The fifth thing, that dei Liberi does not illustrate, but refers to, is the strike. From the wording, and the first Remedy Master of dagger, discussed below, it seems that striking seems to go with the concept of disarming. Of the four illustrated concepts (disarming, breaking, binding and taking to ground), all plays deal with at least one of these, and often more than one.

Note: All plates are taken from the *Pisani-Dossi* manuscript, and are numbered based on the order they appear. The techniques are not generally named in the *Pisani-Dossi* manuscript, but they are in the Getty version. This is compounded by the fact that some plates in the Getty version do not match those in the *Pisani-Dossi* version, and vice versa. For purposes of the present article, the Remedy Masters are names based on the order they are found in the *Pisani-Dossi* manuscript., we will number the Scholler plays in the order they appear following each Remedy Master. Since some of the plays we are illustrating here are not found in the Getty version, and some plates are in one manuscript and not the other, searching for a Getty plate that we use here may be tricky or confusing, and for that we apologize in advance.

Plate 1

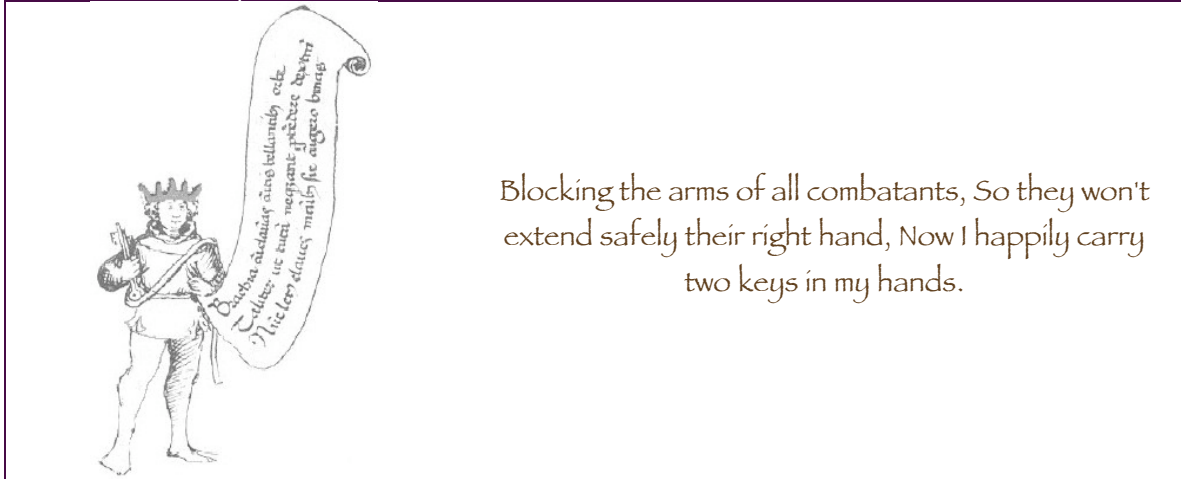
The Master of Disarms



This plate, with the reference to handling the dagger with both hands, may seem self-explanatory, in that it advises all Schollers to become equally proficient with the dagger in their right as well as their left hand. This is unusual, however, as the attackers are never seen wielding the dagger in their left hand. An alternate translation of the *Pisani-Dossi* verse, however, states “For sure victory I represent, so I carry the dagger / with this hand raised see my gesture”. The Getty manuscript is unequivocal, when dei Liberi states “I

Plate 3

The Master of Key Locks



The key is a term that describes an arm lock where an opponent's elbow is bent at approximately a 90° angle, and the arm is twisted to place pressure on the shoulder. Like the arm bar, the key lock was first demonstrated in dei Liberi's grappling, but variations in different positions are shown here. These variations include the lower key (behind the back, described in the grappling section), above the shoulder (the upper key) or by the side of the body (the middle key). All variations will be explained in greater detail as they appear in the plates.

It is practically impossible to force an opponent into a key lock when their arm is not bent. Most key locks, therefore, must be applied in situations where the Player finds his opponent in a position with a bent arm. One of the easiest ways of doing this is to intercept an attacking player before he has a chance to extend his arm to deliver a stabbing attack. This may be what dei Liberi means when he says that this Master blocks the arms of all combatants. As soon as a Player sees that his opponent is striking, he must step forward and block the attacker's dagger arm while it is still bent. Intercepting an attack in this manner will interrupt an attacker's "power arc", and leave him in a position where it will require a great deal of brute strength to straighten his arm and escape the key lock. By stepping into an attack rather than statically waiting for it, the Player can thus take control of an attacker's arm.

The Plays of the Remedy Masters

The plays that follow in the manuscript demonstrate a series of techniques and counter techniques, which dei Liberi arranged according to the Four Masters of the Duel, as set out in his prologue (Conway and Penney 2004). The First Master of the Duel is represented by the initial strike that the attacker makes. A series of Remedy Masters wearing crowns defend against the dagger attacks performed by the unmarked Players. Each of these plays illustrate “core” techniques, generally initial defences. The Students of this Master (wearing leg bands) continue this defence with plays based on the original Remedy Master technique.

These series of plays and counter plays are further grouped based on the type of defence, which is based on the attack made by the Player, including forehand wards, backhand wards and double-hand grabs above and below. Each of these areas will be discussed in further detail below.

Fiore dei Liberi also shows us Contrary Masters, who counter the techniques of the Remedy Masters and his students, and there are even some Contra-contrary Masters who oppose those, but for purposes of the present paper we will only be looking at certain plays of the Remedy Master. These include the plays of four Remedy Masters, and some of their Schollers. These are the basic plays that OMSG requires candidates for the rank of Scholler to learn. We feel these form a solid foundation for the other dagger plays, and the rest of dei Liberi’s art.

The First Remedy Master – Wards to the Inside

Fiore dei Liberi refers to this first set of defences as forehand wards. We also refer to them as wards to the inside, meaning that the play of the Master Remedy involves placing oneself on the inside of the attacker’s dagger. Inside is the side of an opponent’s dagger that places you in front on their body, as opposed to around to their side.

Looking at the plates below, the attacking player is holding the dagger in his right hand. To the defending player, moving towards the right side of the dagger would be to the inside, as this would put the defender in front of the attacker. Stepping to the left would move the defending player to the attacker’s outside.

Defending an attack to the inside (left) and outside (right)



Attacking Player in the forehand plays

Assuming the Player takes a passing step forward to strike, he would begin in a reverse stance. The Master is also in a reverse stance. Since most of the plays to the inside involve stepping forward with the right foot, it follows that the Master would ideally want to await his Player in a left-leg leading stance. As he is attempting to get on the inside of his Player, the Master would generally be looking to use these plays against a downward attack thrown *mandritto* (from right to left).

Plate 5

The 1st Remedy Master of Dagger



I'm the first master of the dagger, full of deceit,
And with my left hand I'll grab the dagger from
your hand: And truly many other tricks I can do,
And my student will do them with malice.

The attacking Player, as stated above, starts in a left leg-leading stance, and takes a passing step forward, striking *mandritto*. The Master blocks the attack by striking the Player's right wrist with the outside of his left hand. The plate shows the Master with his right hand held up in a fist, suggesting that punching the Player will be his next action. This would seem to be the "striking" referred to by dei Liberi in the Getty Manuscript. The verse in the Getty for this play seems to corroborate this, as it states, "I know to remedy so that you cannot strike me, and that I might strike and injure your contrary enemy". Punching the attacker is an important part of this play, even though the object of the technique is to disarm the dagger. Punching the attacker emphasizes a common theme in virtually any self-defence system- do not focus too much on the weapon, so that you forget your opponent. He is the one threatening you, and the dagger is merely a tool.

From a biomechanical point of view, it is very important for the Master to ward with the outside of his left forearm, keeping his palm facing to the right. Although the Master in the plate has grabbed the Player's wrist with a thumb-down grip, there are several reasons why one should not try to grab the Player's wrist with one move. Reaching out to intercept an attack with one's hand open with the palm facing forward leaves the inside of the forearm vulnerable to being stabbed or cut. Leading with the outside of the hand and forearm leaves the Master better protected from wounds to his forearm. Grabbing with the hand is also more difficult- one would have to intercept the attacking arm with the palm of their hand. Warding the attack forearm-to-forearm requires less accuracy, and less risk of missing the attack outright. The third reason why one should never reach to grab with their left hand outstretched is the possibility that they will miss the attacker with their hand, but will catch their thumb on the Player's striking arm. It is incredibly easy to break or dislocate one's thumb in this manner. We always practice warding this attack with the back of the

forearm, and then turn the arm to grab the Player's wrist as near the hand as possible, using a thumb-down grip.

This technique is how all left hand blocks of an overhead right-handed stab should be made, though the footwork will depend on what else the Master would want to do. All plays to the forehand (inside) follow from this primary ward, though the Master (or his Schollers) would want to be at different distances from the Player, depending on the next action. The Scholler also would not necessarily grab the Player's hand as in the illustration, depending on the intended technique.

Note: This block is the Masters play from which a number of Scholler's plays descend. These plays involve grabs and other manoeuvres. The core technique (blocking the strike with the outside of the left forearm) is what we feel is the most important aspect of these plays. Care and attention must be made to drill this technique (and the other "core" or Master techniques). In training, we recommend emphasizing these techniques, rather than focusing too much on the variety of other more elaborate techniques.

To perform the disarm, the Master immediately turns his palm outward to grab the Player's wrist as soon as he makes contact with his forearm, holding as close to the hand as possible. At the same time, the Master twists the Player's forearm by turning his arm in a counter clockwise motion (also stepping in to strike the attacker, as discussed above). If done correctly, the blade of the dagger should be laying flat along the back of the Masters wrist.

Perform this in a fast, strong circular motion, so that the dagger is twisted out of the Player's hand and falls to the ground. If the Master is quick, he might be able to grab the dagger as it comes out of the Player's hand. To be successful this entire manoeuvre must be executed quickly and smoothly.

Plate 7

The 1st Scholler of the 1st Master Remedy



Your right arm is locked under my left;
Much I can hurt you, and keep you locked.

This is a continuation of the Remedy Master technique of Plate 5. The Scholler wards the overhead stab using the Master's play, taking a gather step forward to close the distance between himself and the Player. Timing is important here- the Scholler must ensure that the block with his arm will protect him before he can move closer to the Player. Initially, the ward should happen before the step, but an experienced practitioner would appear as if he is warding and stepping simultaneously. As soon as the stab is checked, the Scholler shoots his left hand past the Player's right forearm from the inside to the outside, under the elbow and back inside. The Scholler finishes this clockwise circle with a strong upward

thrusting motion with his arm (*dente di zenchiar*), making sure to catch the Player's elbow. If successfully applied, as in the illustration, the Scholler should hold the Player in a middle key lock. If done explosively, this technique could cause severe damage to the Player's shoulder, and should always be executed with care. If the Scholler deploys the key lock less powerfully he can hold the Player at bay, allowing him to apply other techniques, especially if he maximizes his leverage by placing his left foot behind the Player's right.

Distance is critical for this manoeuvre. If the Scholler is too close to the Player he will catch the Player's arm above the elbow. This can hold him in place, but will cause little pain. If the Scholler is not close enough he will hook the Player by the forearm, where he can easily escape. When practicing this technique the Player must continuously communicate with the person performing the Scholler's technique, letting him know if he is applying the hold effectively (though not to the point of hurting his partner!)

Note: this manoeuvre can leave the dagger behind the Schollers head, but if executed strongly the pain would likely cause the Player to drop the dagger. Also, the stronger the key lock is applied, the more difficult it will be for the Player to strike at the Scholler with his left hand.

The Third Remedy Master – Wards to the Outside

The following techniques are known as backhand techniques. They can also be referred to as wards to the outside, as the Master and his Schollers move to the outside of the Player to perform these techniques. These plays might best be used against *manreverso* attacks, or downward strikes from the left side, but work against any downward attack, depending on the situation and the comfort level of the practitioner. Master dei Liberi refers to these techniques as “deadly techniques”. This, we believe, is because these techniques generally lead the Master to a position behind the attacking Player, a position from which the Player has very little chance of escape.

Unless otherwise stated, the Remedy Master and his Schollers wait in a right-leg leading stance. As they ward the attack from this position, they will step forward and a bit to the left with their left foot to move to the Players outside.

Plate 31

The 3rd Remedy Master of Dagger



Here start the backhand techniques, strong techniques; Because of these techniques, so many were killed: And my students will start these techniques And will start backhand.

This is the Masters technique for dealing with a *manreverso* strike. The Master shoots his right arm up to block the attack, striking the Player's right wrist with the outside of his right wrist. He immediately turns his wrist to grab the Player's right wrist with his right hand,

thumb down, as he takes a passing step to the left side. As he grabs the wrist, he pulls the arm to keep it straightened, bracing the Player's arm against his forearm or chest.

This is the basic Master technique, and the rest of the Schollers of the Third Remedy Master work from this point. Like the First Remedy Master, this initial play moves to disarm. Remember that you may not move to grab the dagger, depending on the particular play you wish to use.

In the present play, following the outside ward, the Master raises his left arm to grab the blade of the dagger, keeping his palm facing outward, away from him. He is now ready to disarm the Player. In general, when disarming an opponent one will twist the dagger so that it is pulled out of the attacker's hand at its weakest point. This is typically the little finger. In this case the Master would wrench the dagger free by twisting the blade of the dagger towards the Player's elbow, which works well from the position here. The alert practitioner will notice that this also lends itself well to striking the Player in the head with the elbow, both when you step in to grab the dagger, as well as when you twist it out of the Player's hand.

Plate 35

The 4th Scholler of the 3rd Remedy Master



And with this I'll hurt your arm
The way you can feel me holding and doing it.

This is a continuation of the play of the third Remedy Master. It is the first of two techniques of applying an arm bar to an attacker using a ward to the outside. The play that we are looking at right now is an example of what dei Liberi refers to as a hold for love, in that it emphasizes holding a player in a static position, rather than breaking the arm of the attacking player.

The Scholler blocks the attack using *posta frontale*. This generally is the same ward as with one hand, bringing up the left hand so that it can assist the ward, and quickly move to the follow-on play. He then grabs the Player's right wrist with his right hand, and yanks the Player's arm pull him off balance. The Scholler then moves his left hand to the Players right elbow in order to keep the Players arm straight and apply an arm bar. Keeping pressure on the Player's arm, he steps forward with his left foot, making sure his foot is in front of the Player. Continuing into *porta di ferro*, the Scholler can then hold the Player in place, increasing or decreasing the level of pain by adjusting the amount of pressure he puts on the Player's arm. Note that even when the Scholler does not wish to cause excessive pain to the Player, he must always put sufficient pressure on the arm so that the Player is unable to struggle free.

The Fourth Remedy Master – Wards Above

The plays of the fourth Remedy Master of dagger are double-handed techniques. They involve grabbing the attacking Player's dagger arm, and holding it in a strong grip, rather than trying to deflect it to either side. More so than with the two previous techniques, with the double-handed grab the Master and his Schollers need to step forward to seize the initiative of the engagement. The double-hand grab is best used against overhand attacks along the mid-line (*fendente*), though it may work against other overhand attacks, depending on the situation.

Plate 42

The 4th Remedy Master of Dagger



I am a master who grabs with both hands And I can
hurt you above and below: If I twist your shoulders
and don't let your arm go, This way the first
student will hurt you.

This is the introduction to the double hand grab. In this technique, the Player steps forward to attack *fendente*. The Master raises both hands up and forward (*posta frontale*) to grab the Player's wrist/forearm with both hands. Hand position is critical, and error here can result in broken thumbs. The Master must hold both hands open so that he is preparing to grab between his thumb and the rest of his hand, but his two hands need to stay together, so that he meets the Player's arm with both hands simultaneously. If this is not the case, the Master could injure his thumb if the Player's arm strikes his thumb and not the "V" of his hand. As well, the Master's hands must be far enough away from his body that he does not get struck with the dagger even if he successfully intercepts it. It would be desirable for the Master to take a small step to whatever side he plans on continuing his disarm or counter technique (i.e. to the left is he's moving to the outside, and right if he's warding to the inside.) As well, the Master should step towards the Player, so that he can check the strike while the Player's arm is still bent and he has not yet brought his full momentum to bear. Related to this is the idea that the Master has to stop the dagger by "striking" the Player's arm with his hands. There is a greater chance of injury if one simply holds their hands out in order to receive the strike.

Plate 43

The 1st Scholler of the 4th Remedy Master



My master told the truth without failing:
I can take your dagger and you can't leave.

This is a continuation of the play of the fourth Remedy Master (plate 42). This is a somewhat complicated play, in that it appears to use two of the initial Master concepts of dagger, in this case a disarm and a shoulder dislocation. As stated by the verse to the previous play, the Scholler executes the double-handed grab, and firmly holds the Player's wrist so that he can twist the Player's shoulder. If the Scholler begins in a left-leg leading stance, as illustrated in plate 42, he can take a small gathered step to the left side to avoid the Player's dagger, and put him a position to execute the shoulder twist. Maintaining his firm grip on the Players wrist, he then twists the Player's arm down in a clockwise motion while he pivots his body to the right, turning on the ball of his left foot. The Scholler should end up with his back against the back of the Player's right shoulder, and the Player's arm should be under the Scholler's left arm, as illustrated. The verse then alludes to disarming the opponent (who indeed has lost his dagger in the plate). This can be done with either hand (the other keeping the Player's arm in place). If you use the left arm, the right can hold the Player, and the dagger can be wrenched away with a counter-clockwise turn. As soon as the dagger is loose, the right hand can return to the Players arm.

The next part of this play is alluded to in the preceding verse (plate 42), where dei Liberi states that he can hurt the Player by twisting the shoulders. If you study plate 43 the Scholler is leaning back on the Player, and does not seem to be in a stable position at all. The accompanying verse does not say anything directly, but it seems clear that the Scholler as about to fall straight down, kicking out his left leg and landing on the Players shoulder and arm. The Player will be driven into the ground face first, and will dislocate or break his arm and/or shoulder. Please note: This is a dangerous manoeuvre. **Never** used it on a training or sparring partner.

Plate 48

The 6th Scholler of the 4th Remedy Master

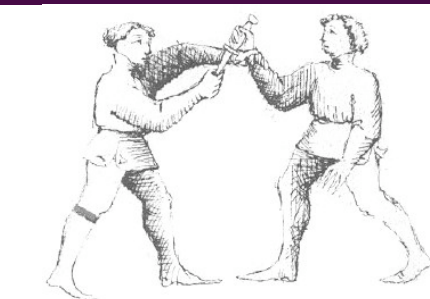


I'll give your dagger one twist
And by that it will be taken from you.

This is a continuation of the play of the fourth Remedy Master (plate 42). Despite the fact that the illustration shows the Scholler holding the Player's wrist with one hand, it is crucial that one perform the grab two-handed, as described above. The Scholler blocks the attack with a two-handed grab. He then can let go with his right hand, and use the back of the hand to push the blade of the dagger out of the Player's grip, in a downward direction from left to right. Note the Player in the illustration still has a firm grip on the dagger. It would be dangerous to immediately grab the blade with your hand. Use the outside of your hand to twist the dagger and loosen the Player's grip. The play continues in the following plate.

Plate 49

The 7th Scholler of the 4th Remedy Master



If I twist your dagger by your elbow
You will feel that it will be grabbed away from you.

This play is a continuation of the sixth Scholler of the fourth Remedy Master (plate 48). Having loosened the Player's grip on the dagger, the Scholler can then roll his hand over to grab the blade of the dagger. Continuing the downward movement, the Scholler twists the dagger towards the Player's elbow. Twisting in this manner places pressure on the weakest part of the Player's grip (his fingertips), allowing the Scholler to easily win the dagger.

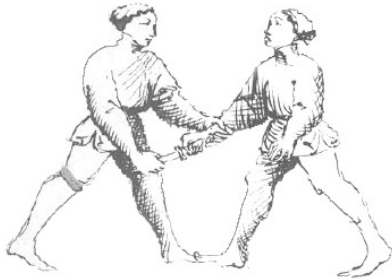
The Eighth Remedy Master – Wards Below

The following techniques are based on a low double-handed grab, which defends against a *sottani*, or underhand attack delivered from a forehand (*sotomano*) grip. In general, such attacks come from the centre, and follow an upward path to attack the groin or belly.

Plate 75**The 8th Remedy Master of Dagger**

With this hold that I have, I can do many techniques,
 Grab away the dagger, break, wound and tie;
 It's the fastest to grab the dagger from the hand
 Without being deceived by the opponent.

This is a double-handed grab, similar to the play of the fourth Remedy Master (plate 42). As with that technique, it is imperative that the Master keeps his hands together, so that the Player cannot power through a single-handed block, breaking the Masters thumb in the process. The Master could also take a small gathered step to the left, to move away from the line of attack, but it is also important that the Masters arms are outstretched (though never locked) to make sure that the tip of a long dagger does not reach him even if the block is successful. From this block there are a variety of disarms, breaks or takedowns that the Master's Schollers can use, as dei Liberi indicates.

Plate 76**The 1st Scholler of the 8th Remedy Master**

If I twist the dagger by your elbow,
 Your dagger will be mine, no doubt.

This play is a continuation of the eighth Remedy Master (plate 75). Although the Scholler has only one hand on the Player's wrist, and his grabbing the dagger, he still began with the two handed grab as illustrated above. Fiore dei Liberi (1409) is very clear about this in the Getty manuscript when he states "with the *prese* that he has done I have followed with my right hand leaving the *presa*". Having successfully blocked the Player's thrust, the Scholler maintains his grip on the Player's wrist with his left hand, releases he grip of his right hand, and disarms him by pushing the blade of the dagger down, in a semi-circular motion towards the Player's right elbow. This is similar to the play of the seventh Scholler of the fourth Master Remedy (plate 49).

Plate 77

The 2nd Scholler of the 8th Remedy Master

Without losing hold of you, I go underneath your arm: And from behind your back I will burden you.

This play is a continuation of the eighth Remedy Master (plate 75). Once the Scholler has successfully intercepted the Player's thrust, he pivots his body to the right, turning on the ball of his left foot. At the same time, he maintains a firm grip on the Players wrist, lifting the arm up to place it over his left shoulder. This manoeuvre is easier to perform if the Scholler keep tension on the Player's arm, pulling him forward and off balance. If the Scholler has kept a firm grip on the Players wrist, the Players arm should be twisted so that the arm is hyper extended with the elbow pointing downward. From here, the Scholler pulls the arm down in an explosive motion, breaking the players arm. This is a violent technique for war and should **never** be used on a training or sparring partner.

Note: Under no circumstances should the Scholler twist to the left, so that the Player ends up over his right shoulder. This would leave the Player directly behind the Scholler, with his right arm bent around the Schollers neck, and his left arm in an excellent position to grab the Scholler.

Conclusion

The plays described in this article include only a small portion of the dagger techniques of Fiore dei Liberi. They include wards for each of dei Liberi's four angles of attack. Continuing from these Master techniques we demonstrate a disarming technique, as well as an attack on the arm (either an arm bar or a key lock) for each defence. None of the plays demonstrate a takedown, and we have not included any plays of the Contrary or Contra-contrary Masters.

These plays provide a starting foundation for further study of the medieval dagger of Fiore dei Liberi, and the rest of his fighting system. There are a number of groups around the world working to interpret and understand these techniques. We feel that it is important to make our work (good or bad) available to the rest of the western martial arts community. In doing so we hope to further research into the art of Fiore dei Liberi. As with our grappling article, we hope that people look at this with a critical eye, and make his or her own examination of the original manuscripts. If you use anything at all from this article in your study of the art of Fiore dei Liberi, thank you.

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